

August 5, 2020

The Honorable Alex Azar
Secretary
U.S. Department of Health and Human
Services
200 Independence Avenue SW
Washington, D.C. 20201

Secretary Azar,

Thank you for your continued efforts to provide relief to Americans across the United States during the COVID-19 pandemic. We write today to ask that you provide our nation's schools and families with the tools and information they need to effectively return children to the classroom this Fall.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, an overwhelming majority of U.S. schools have shut their doors in an effort to slow the spread of COVID-19. While these closures were necessary, they have placed an unprecedented burden on our families and proven how indispensable schools are to our children and communities. Schools offer children more than just access to in-person instruction and learning. They afford opportunities for emotional and social development, the delivery of critical physical and mental health services, and a vital safety net for students in broken or low-income homes who depend on their school as a refuge from abusive parents or a reliable source for a meal.

Without students in the classroom, the health and education of our children is at risk. Research into socially isolated children tells us that a sustained isolation puts them at severe risk for depression and anxiety¹. Moreover, preliminary studies on the impacts of missing school indicate the average student could begin this school year having lost as much as a third of their expected learning gains² – with marginalized, vulnerable, and special needs students suffering from the most significant learning loss. If we want to secure a healthy and promising future for our children, we should work to re-open schools safely this Fall.

While research into COVID-19 has established that children are far less likely than adults to suffer serious illness or complications from the virus, it remains unclear how easily children contract the virus and what role they play in transmitting the virus to other children or their more vulnerable adult teachers and caregivers. For example, studies into viral loads have found child COVID-19 patients to have just as many viral particles of SARS-CoV-2 as adults, thus implying that children are as infectious and able to transmit the virus at the same rate as adults. Subsequent case and seroepidemiologic investigations, however, suggest children play a far more limited

¹ Loades, Maria Elizabeth et al. "Rapid Systematic Review: The Impact of Social Isolation and Loneliness on the Mental Health of Children and Adolescents in the Context of COVID-19." *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, S0890-8567(20)30337-3. 3 Jun. 2020, doi:10.1016/j.jaac.2020.05.009

² Kuhfeld, Megan, James Soland, Beth Tarasawa, Angela Johnson, Erik Ruzek, and Jing Liu. (2020). Projecting the potential impacts of COVID-19 school closures on academic achievement. (EdWorkingPaper: 20-226). Retrieved from Annenberg Institute at Brown University: <https://doi.org/10.26300/cdrv-yw05>

role³⁴⁵. In fact, a recent study of six primary schools in France found children were not vectors of the virus and did not further its spread to other students, teachers, or non-teaching faculty⁶. Still, the volume of data in school settings is far too limited to draw any firm conclusions.

Uncovering definitive answers on the role children play in transmitting COVID-19 is critical in our efforts to re-open schools safely and on time. If, for example, research reveals that children infected with COVID-19 rarely transmit the virus to adult school staff or adult family members, then many of the challenging and costly measures that schools try to implement – such as A/B rotation days, increased ventilation, eliminating sports or extracurriculars, or mask wearing – can be reconsidered. That could take a significant burden off schools and benefit students greatly.

We therefore respectfully request that you conduct a review of the existing literature on transmissions of COVID-19 in children as soon as possible. We also ask that you quickly disseminate results of this review, including any new information, so schools can be informed as they contemplate how to re-open.

In addition, we ask that you provide detailed mitigation measures that consider the financial constraints schools are facing. We recommend offering guidance that is tiered and gives highest priority to policies that the CDC views as essential to mitigating the virus. In the longer term, we request that you undertake additional studies to better understand the level of risk to families, teachers, and students when classroom-based instruction begins.

Our children have done everything we have asked of them during this pandemic and we owe it to them to safely re-open schools this Fall. Our country has a long road ahead, with many challenges to face and overcome, but none are more important than ensuring the health and well-being of our children. We look forward to continuing to work alongside you and thank you for your immediate attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

³ Mizumoto K, Omori R, Nishiura H. Age specificity of cases and attack rate of novel 1 coronavirus disease (COVID-19) 2. <https://doi.org/10.1101/2020.03.09.20033142>

⁴ Li, W., B. Zhang, J. Lu, S. Liu, Z. Chang, P. Cao, X. Liu, P. Zhang, Y. Ling, K. Tao and J. Chen (2020). “The characteristics of household transmission of COVID-19.” Clinical infectious diseases: an official publication of the Infectious Diseases Society of America. 17. <https://doi.org/10.1093/cid/ciaa450>

⁵ Zhang J, Litvinova M, Liang Y, et al, Changes in contact patterns shape the dynamics of the COVID-19 outbreak in China, Science, 29th April 2020, DOI: 10.1126/science.abb8001
<https://science.sciencemag.org/content/early/2020/05/04/science.abb8001>

⁶ “COVID-19 in Primary Schools: No Significant Transmission among Children or from Students to Teachers.” Institut Pasteur, 29 June 2020, www.pasteur.fr/en/press-area/press-documents/covid-19-primary-schools-no-significant-transmission-among-children-students-teachers.